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“Combating Anti-Semitism Today”

Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe
Rep. Chris Smith, Chairman
December 2, 2011

Welcome and thanks to our witnesses, and to everyone, for joining us this morning.

Almost a decade ago, in May 2002, I chaired a Helsinki commission hearing focused on the horrifying spike in anti-Semitism making itself throughout much of the OSCE region. Many of our witnesses today testified at that hearing, which put the issue of combating anti-Semitism on the top of the OSCE’s agenda, resulting in OSCE commitments on fighting anti-Semitism – and a series of high-level annual conferences on combating anti-Semitism – and even led to the creation of a global network of parliamentarians united against anti-Semitism, the Interparliamentary Coalition Combating Anti-Semitism, of which I am on the steering committee.

A lot of good has come out of this – it’s worth recalling some of the things we’ve done. Since that 2002 hearing, the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly has annually passed declarations addressing anti-Semitism and calling for concrete measures by all participating States and the OSCE. At the seminal High-Level Conference in Berlin in 2004, leaders from throughout the OSCE region met to focus specifically on combating anti-Semitism, leading the participating States to commit, at the Sofia Ministerial later that year, to collect and report hate crimes data.

In that same year a Tolerance Unit with a focus on anti-Semitism was established within the OSCE’s Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights or ODIHR and the OSCE appointed a Personal Representative on Combating Anti-Semitism. I am very pleased that Rabbi Andrew Baker, a critical force in the development of the Berlin conference and creation of this position, now fills this position and is able to join us today. Rabbi Baker, I was also very happy to have participated, at your invitation, in the OSCE meeting on anti-Semitism in public discourse, which you organized last March.

The OSCE is now equipped with a toolbox to combat anti-Semitism, ranging from more than a dozen publications focused on addressing anti-Semitic hate crimes, Holocaust remembrance, and now has a new Training Against Hate Crimes for Law Enforcement program to assist participating States in their efforts. The Anti-Defamation League and other NGOs that fight to ensure that the human rights and dignity of Jews will always and everywhere be fully respected – they have been integral to this work. While the OSCE has the potential to contribute mightily to this fight, it is only truly effective when it works with these vital human rights defenders.

Efforts in the U.S. Congress and other parliaments have complemented this work over the years. The Inter-parliamentary Coalition for Combating Anti-Semitism, which held its most recent major international conference in Ottawa last fall, has been a crucial forum for parliamentarians to work across national boundaries to address common problem of anti-Semitism.

In our own Congress, other members and I have worked to fight anti-Semitism through this commission as well as the Congressional Anti-Semitism Taskforce, which I co-chair. It was a 2004 amendment of mine that created the State Department's Office to Monitor and Combat Anti-Semitism and the Special Envoy on Anti-Semitism – of course we are very pleased to have the current Special Envoy, Hannah Rosenthal, with us here today. Ms. Rosenthal is doing an excellent job – I got to know her last year in Ottawa – and of course her presence is a reminder of our government's commitment to the fight against anti-Semitism.

Yet our work is far from done. Despite the efforts of many good people, mostly in courageous NGOs but also in our government and a few other governments – despite the conferences, commitments, laws, training, monitoring – the measure of our success is what happens on the ground. By most accounts, the despicable evil of anti-Semitism has decreased in most parts of the OSCE region in recent years – but it still remains at higher levels than in 2000. This is simply unacceptable, and it's why we're here today.

I'd like to close with a word on the Combating Anti-Semitism Act of 2010, legislation I introduced last fall, and which was taken as a model by the Ottawa conference of the ICCA. The purpose of that bill was to strengthen the State Department's – and Ms. Rosenthal's – efforts to combat global anti-Semitism. Today it is with the goal of introducing a new version of this bill, that I seek everyone's advice on two questions: what is the nature of the anti-Semitic danger *today*; and how do you think our government can more effectively lead the fight against this scourge?